

## STUDY 19

# ‘Birds with Broken Wings’

*Rod James*

Most of those awakened by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ go from strength to strength as they grow in faith, hope and love. Such were the believers at Colossae of whom Paul says:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven (Col. 1:3–5).<sup>1</sup>

The same was true for those at Thessalonica of whom he says:

Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring (2 Thess. 1:4).

Yet even among these robust believers there would have been those who struggled in their Christian faith and seemed not to make progress with their broken lives. Geoffrey Bingham calls these folk ‘birds with broken wings’ in his book entitled, *The Wisdom of God and the Healing of Man*. In a chapter entitled ‘Kindness for Birds with Broken Wings’ he identifies three kinds of ‘maimed people’:

... the first being those who, through innate weakness and lack of astuteness, seem incapable of facing up to life. Sometimes they are born with certain handicaps of mind or body or both, but generally handicapped people are astute and learn to cope with life even though they have impediments. However, this first kind of ‘birds with broken wings’ never seem to know how to handle life. For the most part they are not evil in intent, bitter and cynical, but gentle and honest. However, they lack the power to be self-helpful and competent in life. Some of them simply seem to remain poor, are dominated by others, or are without guile and lack competitiveness.

The second kind are people who seem morally sick. They could—if they would—reason out their situations, for they have the ability to live and make their way in life. However, they have lost the zest to do so. They seem always to be doing things which are wrong and awkward, and yet excuse themselves as though they are not to blame for what happens—as though they did not set out to do the acts which are wrong.

The third group of persons are those who seem to be apathetic, who feel inferior, who are easily depressed, and who seem to find life difficult to handle. They appear to be pessimistic, easily discouraged, difficult to encourage, and almost seem to resent being urged or encouraged out of their pathetic states of mind.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Wisdom of God and the Healing of Man*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, pp. 246–7.

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Anyone who has been involved in pastoral ministry will recognise the three groups that Geoffrey has identified. Commenting on what to do with or for these folk, Geoffrey says:

What is common to the three groups is their inability to emerge from their states. It is as though they fatalistically believe they are set in such states for ever, and even as though they do not wish to be made whole. For the most part they do not emerge, and the question is whether we should persist with them or give up on them after a reasonable period of time. Such a question is not easily answered. We need to have enough kindness to persist until we know the answer, and then we have to consider the relationship between 'the kindness and the severity of God'. Is severity as much required as kindness?<sup>3</sup>

In this present study I cannot work through the three sorts of people categorised by Geoffrey and give you prescriptive instructions as to what to do with each. What is helpful is to see that each group is different from the others, and the Holy Spirit therefore may incline us to respond differently to each, as Geoffrey suggests:

Of course—as in the case of the second grouping—where repentance, conversion, faith and obedience are required, it will not be kindness to sustain persons in their obstinate states of mind. In the case of the first and third groupings we will need to show kindness as we are led by the Spirit of God.<sup>4</sup>

### **MESSING AROUND WITH BROKEN BIRDS**

To deal adequately with this aspect of our ministry as Christians we will need to confront something in our own disposition. In matters of faith we are keen to scale the heights and soar with the eagles, and we are stimulated and excited by those who feel likewise. To retrace our steps down the mountain of God in order to help broken birds at lower altitudes does not appeal to the instincts of our zeal. Only as we 'learn Christ' (Eph. 4:20) as the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:14–18) and who goes looking for the silly lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7), can we begin to have compassion for birds with broken wings.

In addition to the wonderful example of the Good Shepherd, there are more than enough biblical exhortations urging us to do this:

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27).

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35).

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions (Rom. 14:1).

And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all (1 Thess. 5:14).

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<sup>3</sup> G. Bingham, *The Wisdom of God and the Healing of Man*, p. 247.

<sup>4</sup> G. Bingham, *The Wisdom of God and the Healing of Man*, p. 254.

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Since each of these exhortations was made to a different congregation—Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Rome, and Thessalonica—we conclude that for Paul this was an aspect of service that every Christian congregation needs to integrate into its life.

### **CUTTING AND RUNNING**

In recent years, as an itinerant travelling minister, my ministry has been characterised by a ‘cut and run’ pattern. By that I mean that I have been able to minister in a place and move on before too many birds with broken wings emerged requiring particular attention and perseverance. I mention this because ‘cutting and running’ is exactly what we may feel like doing when such labour-intensive people wish to draw upon us for help.

I defer in honour to those servants of God who labour continuously in one place with the same group of people. To them is entrusted the *cura animarum* (the cure of souls). Something between cutting and running on the one hand and getting bogged down on the other would be a helpful path to find—helpful for those engaged in local ministry, and helpful for their brothers and sisters with broken wings.

### **‘GIVE ME LIFE, O LORD, ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD’**

Having said all that we have about these folk who seem not to heal and progress, and who demand so much attention and assistance, we need to balance our perspective lest we become fatalistic or pessimistic in our pastoral care. We can gain this balance by giving attention to the way in which God brings any of us to wholeness, and that is by hearing with faith the word of his grace towards us:

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’? (Gal. 3:5–6).

For birds with broken wings, hearing the word of God’s grace can have many impediments. Timothy Rogers (1658–1728) was speaking from personal experience of severe depression when he advised as follows:

Do not urge your melancholy friends to do what is out of their power. They are like persons whose bones are broken, and who are incapacitated for action. Their disease is accompanied with perplexing and tormenting thoughts; if you can innocently divert them, you would do them a great kindness; but do not urge them to any thing which requires close and intent thinking; this will only increase the disease. But you will ask, ought we not to urge them to hear the Word of God? I answer, if they are so far gone in the disease as to be in continual, unremitting anguish, they are not capable of hearing, on account of the painful disorder of their minds. But if their disorder is not come to such a distressing height, you may kindly and gently persuade them to attend on the preaching of the Word; but beware of using a peremptory and violent method.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, Banner of Truth, London, 1967 (1844), p. 38.

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Concerning depression, Archibald Alexander asserted: 'of all the remedies for this malady, the pure doctrines of grace are the most effectual to resuscitate the melancholy mind'.<sup>6</sup> And Geoffrey Bingham says, 'it is the revelation of God as love that brings conclusive healing to the human spirit'.<sup>7</sup> The word of God's grace (Acts 20:32) is so completely wonderful in its mercy, comprehensive in its scope and effective in its outcome, that as helpers of our brothers and sisters we do well to maintain the expectation that sometime, somehow, the greatness of God's redemption will dawn upon their souls. To this end we do well to pray for them:

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:15–23).

Psalm 119 is remarkable as the expressions of a human soul who, on the one hand, experienced considerable anguish and affliction, but who, on the other, looked resolutely to God to do all that he had promised:

My soul clings to the dust;  
give me life according to your word! (v. 25).

My soul melts away for sorrow;  
strengthen me according to your word! (v. 28).

You have dealt well with your servant,  
O LORD, according to your word (v. 65).

I am severely afflicted;  
give me life, O LORD, according to your word! (v. 107).

Let my cry come before you, O LORD;  
give me understanding according to your word!  
Let my plea come before you;  
deliver me according to your word (v. 169f.).

Clearly the faith exercised by the psalmist is commendable considering his distress. Other troubled souls may not have his faith and resolve to look to God. But perhaps we can assist them to hear with faith, and so to pray, 'Give me life according to your word'.

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Bingham, *The Wisdom of God and the Healing of Man*, p. 254.

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### **'THE TONGUE OF THOSE WHO ARE TAUGHT'**

To assist birds with broken wings to look to God in the light of his saving and healing word may require, at least in the first instance, that we are ready and able to be, for our afflicted friends, a walking, talking Bible. The prophet reflected on how God had prepared him to sustain the weary:

The Lord GOD has given me  
the tongue of those who are taught,  
that I may know how to sustain with a word  
him who is weary.  
Morning by morning he awakens;  
he awakens my ear  
to hear as those who are taught (Isa. 50:4).

To assist those for whom hearing is impaired by affliction, we need to have 'the tongue of those who are taught'. Memorising the great words and promises of God from Scripture and speaking them as the Spirit leads can be both an immediate encouragement to the faith of others, and also an example to them of how faith is built up by ingesting and feeding upon the word of God. Timothy Rogers' instruction to us as helpers of the afflicted is a wise and compassionate example of this principle:

Put your poor afflicted friends in mind, continually, of the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ. Often impress on their minds that He is merciful and gracious; that as far as the heavens are above the earth, so far are His thoughts above their thoughts; His thoughts of mercy above their self-condemning, guilty thoughts. Teach them, as much as you can, to look unto God, by the great Mediator, for grace and strength, and not too much to pore over their own souls, where there is so much darkness and unbelief. And turn away their thoughts from the decrees of God. Show them what great sinners God has pardoned, and encourage them to believe and to hope for mercy.<sup>8</sup>

### **BROKEN BIRDS IN THE BODY OF CHRIST**

Vincent Donovan, in his book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, recalls a moment in his evangelising of a Masai community in East Africa when, having shared the gospel with them in a series of meetings over one year, the time came for the people to respond to the message by either receiving it and being baptised, or rejecting it. Having explained this, he indicated that he would go away and give them a week to decide before returning to learn of their response. Before leaving he stood in front of the community and said:

This old man sitting here has missed too many of our instruction meetings. He was always out herding cattle. He will not be baptized with the rest. These two on this side will be baptized because they always attended, and understood very well what we talked about. So did this young mother. She will be baptized. But that man there has obviously not understood the instructions. And that lady there has scarcely believed the gospel message. They cannot be baptized. And this warrior has not shown enough effort . . .<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, pp. 41f.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, SCM Press, London, 1982, pp. 91f.

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Donovan records how the elderly leader of the community interrupted him:

The old man, Ndangoya, stopped me politely but firmly, 'Padri, why are you trying to break us up and separate us? During this whole year that you have been teaching us, we have talked about these things when you were not here, at night around the fire. Yes, there have been lazy ones in this community. But they have been helped by those with much energy. There are stupid ones in the community, but they have been helped by those who are intelligent. Yes, there are ones with little faith in this village, but they have been helped by those with much faith. Would you turn out and drive off the lazy ones and the ones with little faith and the stupid ones? From the first day I have spoken for these people. And I speak for them now. Now, on this day one year later, I can declare for them and for all this community, that we have reached the step in our lives where we can say, "We believe".'

### **BEARING WITH THE FAILINGS OF THE WEAK**

This Masai community seemed to instinctively understand God's will for them as a Christian community. Their leader's words remind us of St Paul's exhortation to us, as believers:

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up (Rom. 15:1-2).

One example of 'bear[ing] with the failings of the weak' which Paul dealt with at length was the question of food offered to idols. For the person of strong faith this was not an issue since an idol is not anything. But to a person of weaker faith, eating such food could be an act of disobedience to God which would cause them to fall into a state of guilt, and possibly unrepentant sin. In this matter Paul says:

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble (1 Cor. 8:13).

Such carefulness, says Paul, should cause us to 'decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother' (Rom. 14:13). No doubt there are many decisions in life which we should address with this principle in mind.

### **RAISING THE QUESTION**

We certainly haven't answered all the questions that arise in relation to birds with broken wings. But we have raised the issue of such birds and, having done so, find that it is an issue that presses on us personally as Christians:

- How am I disposed to God's birds with broken wings?
- Am I more interested in those who will scale the heights with me?
- Do I cut and run when broken birds approach me?
- Or do I have that same Spirit that was in Paul when he said:

Who is weak, and I am not weak?

Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Cor. 11:29).